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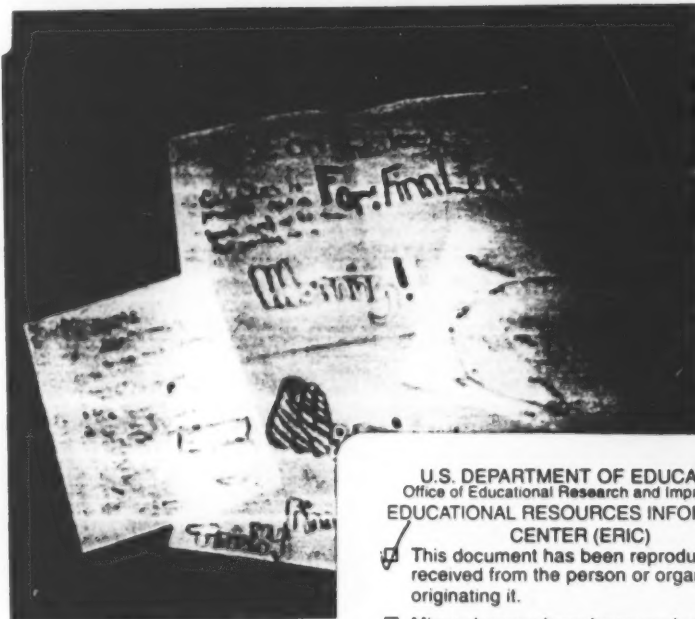
ABSTRACT

A classroom study examined a variety of informal drama activities incorporated into a language arts program. During the year, the fourth-grade students engaged in six different drama events as responses to a variety of class read-alouds. Each drama event (pantomime, tableau, town or class meeting, talk show, buddy conversation, and storytelling) provides descriptions of the activities in which students participated as well as some of their responses and class concerns. Data included observation, videotaping, individual interviews, and reflective sharing and writing. Results indicated that informal drama: (1) provided language arts connections of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and higher-order thinking; (2) promoted cooperation, confidence, creativity, and imagination; (3) enhanced self-esteem of students during the school year; and, in the process, (4) provided everyone with a fun way of learning.
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A CLASS STUDY
OF INEORMAL DRAMA
IN THE FOURTH GRADE

CAROL CARR KIEFFER



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National Reading Research Center

**A Class Study of
Informal Drama in the
Fourth Grade**

Carol Carr Kieffer
South Jackson Elementary School

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE NO. 16
Winter 1996

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A Class Study of Informal Drama in the Fourth Grade

Abstract. *This piece examines a classroom study of a variety of informal drama activities incorporated into a language arts program. During the year, students engaged in six different drama events as responses to a variety of class read-alouds. Each drama event (pantomime, tableau, town or class meeting, talk show, buddy conversation, and storytelling) provides descriptions of the activities in which the students participated as well as some of their responses and class concerns. Through observation, videotaping, individual interviews, and reflective sharing and writing, students and the author discovered the value of informal drama in the classroom. During this study, the author found informal drama provided language arts connections of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and higher-order thinking; promoted cooperation, confidence, creativity, and imagination; enhanced self-esteem of students during the school year; and, in the process, provided everyone with a fun way of learning.*

"Being somebody else, I think, is the most valuable part. Because you're not yourself anymore, you're trying to play someone different than yourself. You're used to being yourself all your life and then one time you get to be somebody else." Quadrika was reflecting on a year of informal drama as a part of the language arts program in my fourth-grade classroom.

She was a student who read well and had wonderful support at home, but she struggled somewhat in math and she was still often a phonetic speller. "Being someone else" through various drama activities really helped Quadrika grow as a reader and writer during the school year.

In my classroom, literature was a daily focus. We had reading and writing workshops, students were involved in at least 30 min of silent, sustained reading of their choice, and read-alouds were important. I incorporated informal drama as an additional way to encourage reading literature and making personal connections with reading. I also saw it as a fun way to develop oral language, and as a way to promote positive self-esteem.

As one focus of my language arts program, drama events and activities were selected in accordance with the literature I read aloud daily to the class. During this classroom research study, five picture books and one chapter book were enriched by informal drama activities discussed in this resource.

Description of Drama Activities and Events

I used six different drama events throughout the year; most events were revisited with different books. Some literature activities used only one drama event, while other literature activities used as many as three drama events. Because of the repetition of events, students became familiar with them and better able to

concentrate on added challenges provided, such as focusing on the literature, or the development of their responses or reactions. Below are descriptions of our drama events and literature activities.

Pantomime—Students acted without words, using gestures to express themselves

The very first week of school, I introduced the students to pantomime and focused not on a book, but on observation and paying attention to others. We gathered in a circle and discussed pantomime as I pulled out a large piece of imaginary clay from my pocket. As I began to form a pair of glasses, I explained to the students that they could mold this clay into anything they wished when it was finally passed to them, but they could not tell us what it was in words. The students were tentative; they mimicked similar things I had done. For example, they made jewelry or objects found on people's faces or in their hair. But as the activity progressed, they became more confident. They took more time creating, and they loved the attention of everybody trying to figure out what they were doing. Their imagination and creativity were thriving; each one was involved. It was a simple, non-threatening event that hooked each child on drama. Later that fall, before we shared our first literature for drama, I asked them if they wanted to pretend. They were excited and ready, thinking back to the day we pantomimed with the clay blob.

Storytelling—Students invented creative stories to share orally, retelling specific parts or elaborating on ideas or events presented

John Burningham's *Would You Rather* (1978) deals with impossible scenarios that actively involve readers in decision making. This worked well for students devising their own stories to explain their chosen events. His book begins: "Would you rather have a house surrounded by water? A house surrounded by snow? Or a house surrounded by a jungle?" I began to tell them a story about how I woke up that morning and found that snow had covered everything. It was so deep I could not even open a door! I had to climb out of a window, taking a shovel with me. Then I began to dig out our dog from his house. Next, I hooked him up to a sled, and he was strong enough to pull me and the sled all the way into school. In fact, he was still outside waiting for me.

Then I asked the students if any of them wished to share what happened to them that morning and how they arrived at school. Rodney and Cynthia both said that they had to climb through their chimneys to reach the roof because of the high water. The dialogue that followed began something like this:

Rodney: I climbed up a ladder through the chimney and carried my bed up with me.

Another

student: Why did you take your bed?

Rodney: I knew it would float. It was wooden.

Another

student: How did you get a bed through your chimney?

Rodney: Oh, it was collapsible.

Another student mentioned having to carefully climb onto the back of a cheetah to ride through the jungle just to get to school.

Buddy Conversations—Pairs of students gossiped about book characters or events on the phone or over the fence to share their ideas and understanding of the book and relate it to themselves

I chose *The Day The Teacher Went Bananas* by James Howe (1984), a book about a classroom of students that accidentally receives a gorilla as a teacher, because it deals with the familiar setting of a classroom and sets up the conflict of the students' favorite teacher being sent away. This allowed students to try using the "mantle of the expert" (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985), a change from the more common teacher-student role.

Students first called other classmates on their imaginary phones to share some of their feelings about this new teacher. They broke into pairs and began talking, and some mentioned how odd this

teacher was compared to other teachers they had had in the past. Others shared how much they really liked this teacher because learning was fun. Each group was talking about the book, but relating to it in different ways; all were eager to share their stories.

Cynthia Rylant's *When The Relatives Came* (1985) provided another opportunity for buddy conversation. This book lent itself particularly well to the dramatic event of buddy conversations, because Rylant retells the attitudes, thoughts, and feelings of the participants in a large, extended family's summer gathering. Upon completing the reading, students shared on the imaginary telephone events in their recent family gathering at their house or a relative's home. Some pantomimed; others used rulers or other objects from the classroom as their phones; one group even used quickly folded paper as cellular phones.

During a whole-class discussion about good things in these buddy conversations and those things that still needed work, students made a variety of comments. Two students said that they were calling each other, one from home and one from a pay phone, and that they felt like they were two adults talking, not just kids. Another group mentioned problems with call waiting as relatives were phoning back to say thanks and letting them know they arrived home safely. Another student complimented his partner for sounding so excited and telling a lot of details about the trip.

Class or Town Meetings—Students role-played characters, such as classmates or townspeople, for these meetings dealing with a conflict or an open-ended issue presented in a specific book

Our first class meeting involved the book *The Day the Teacher Went Bananas* (Howe, 1984). I modified the situation provided at the end of the book. Rather than keeping the gorilla at the zoo, the students were presented with the problem of convincing their parents, principal, and zoo keeper that this gorilla should be their teacher. The students began to get excited about the drama and thought of all sorts of ways to solve the problem. They yelled out their responses, interrupting each other and hurting feelings. We stopped the drama and discussed the problem. They returned to a calmer mode and decided to split into committees to work on different ideas for solving their dilemma.

When we concluded our class meeting, we sat down as a group and discussed what went well and what kind of problems we had. They saw that there was a problem with the behavior during the class meeting, and the class as a whole came up with two guidelines for drama that we used in our classroom for the rest of the year. One of those guidelines was to stay in role. During the class meeting, someone had wanted to be the gorilla. This caused a dilemma during the activity because the character of the gorilla had not been invited to attend the class meeting, since his role in the make-believe classroom was the conflict

we were trying to solve. The class decided it was very important to remember that you were not yourself: you were someone else, and that job was very hard to do. Our second drama rule was that everyone needs to listen. Throughout the year, we continually referred to these guidelines.

Talk Show—Students role-played guests on a daytime talk show, with the teacher as the host

Our talk show, an extension of the text *Would You Rather* (Burningham, 1978), was very similar to a class meeting; but since I was the host, it was more teacher directed. Students came up with creative stories and solutions when faced with the possibility of some kind of large animal entering their home. One child mentioned that while she was in the bath, she heard a news report that animals were on the loose; and shortly afterward, an elephant came running into her bathroom and drank all the water from her tub, forcing her to get out. Another student had a hippo in his bed and shared how he put antlers on it and called in his father, who happened to be a hunter. His father, however, was a poor shot and the hippo-deer got away and was running through the city somewhere.

Tableaus—Groups of students represented a specific event from a book by creating a frozen scene or photo

Another activity in drama involved the book *The Seal Mother* by Mordicai Gerstein (1986). Gerstein's

book is based on folklore; a seal sheds her skin and becomes a beautiful woman who marries and has a son, but then wishes to return to her seal family. We used the event of tableau, or frozen pictures, with this book. After reading the entire story, we looked at a final illustration, a family photo, and discussed how we could create a still photo with class members. We practiced with volunteers making a still family photo, commenting on positive drama actions such as their seriousness, being able to freeze when needed, and use of facial expression to create a feeling or tone for the picture. We split into two groups, and each group reviewed the beginning, middle, and end of the story and came up with an event that could be represented by a still photo involving everyone in the group. Retelling the story was important, as was group dynamics; everyone had to agree on a story event, then decide upon roles and practice. Before freezing, each group had 5 sec to act out what was happening to provide clues to the audience. The practice was important for developing actions and nonverbal expressions for this non-freeze time.

When we read *The Room* by Mordicai Gerstein (1984), we participated once more in the event of tableau. In this book, Gerstein introduces the reader to a single room for rent and the various tenants who lived there. Because each page provides a picture of the room and the current occupants, together with a short text, this book lent itself well to the creation of tableaux of new inhabitants. Students broke themselves into two groups and were given the task of

deciding who the new occupants would be and how they would use the room. Then, after practice, each group shared its page of the book with its frozen picture. The students began to see themselves as experts, critiquing their practice performances, trying to improve their scene with better defined actions and expressions. They also found it easier to freeze quickly and for a longer period of time, because they had their previous tableau experience to which they could refer. Again, they enjoyed discovering who the other group decided to have inhabit the room by carefully studying its performance.

Multiple Activities With One Book

Near the end of the year, I read a chapter of a book by Mollie Hunter entitled *A Stranger Came Ashore* (1975). Hunter's suspense story deals with the folklore of seals taking human form. A stranger, Finn Learson, claims to be a victim of a shipwreck washed upon the shores of the island of Black Ness. I chose this book as a read-aloud for the class because it was one of my favorites, not planning to extend it with informal drama. Yet, as we began to chart the clues about this mysterious stranger washed upon the shore of the remote Scottish island of Black Ness, the students became involved with the story, and drama grew as a natural extension of their excitement and interest. While we were still reading the story, I stopped and asked the students if they wanted to pretend. The conflict the stranger was causing among

the townspeople of Black Ness was apparent. Some villagers saw nothing unusual about him, while others did not trust him one bit. There was something odd going on, but no one was really sure what. The students were eager to get involved.

We began with buddy conversations over the fence, because such a remote village would have no phones. Students were to gossip with their neighbors. "Share what you have noticed about the stranger," I prompted. "What has your neighbor noticed? Can you figure out anything else?" Students then broke into pairs and began to retell the story, adding details and, for some, developing an understanding of the plot of the story. As one group began role playing, they drank tea and talked with an accent. It was interesting to see their seriousness and hear their descriptions and comments as they pulled and expanded upon ideas from the book.

The class then gathered on the carpet, and we shared some of the conversations neighbors heard about Finn Learson. We also discussed what was good about their buddy work and what needed some improvement. Groups who felt they did well thought they had shared a lot of information. Those who felt they needed some improvement said that perhaps someone in their group was not helping out as well as s/he should, while others felt that members of their group were not staying in role; they were not remembering that they were Black Ness villagers. The guidelines for drama that they developed at the beginning of the year, particularly staying in role,

usually came up for discussion each time we began or debriefed.

Next, we started the town meeting. As the mayor, I explained that this emergency meeting was called because talk was traveling throughout town about Finn Learson, and many people felt we needed to take the matter into our own hands and get information about Finn Learson and his purpose on the island. Students quickly took an active part in the town meeting and provided many suggestions.

A lively exchange continued with villagers questioning Robbie about Finn Learson, and Robbie getting his answers from his book knowledge and embellishing upon answers the author had not yet provided. The villagers decided that perhaps we needed to arrange for a group to interview Robbie and gather as much information from him as we could. Committees began to organize while the secretary of our town meeting took minutes. One committee was set up to find the selkie skin, so five villagers took off to devise a plan to find it and decide what to do with it after they had found it. Two townswomen decided they wanted to take Finn Learson to lunch and very slyly ask questions to get information from him. Members of another group decided they wanted to spy on Finn Learson, following him for a day to see what he was up to, so they went off to work on a plan. The remaining villagers concluded that it would be necessary to warn the townspeople who

could not make it to the meeting about the dangers of Finn Learson, so they dismissed themselves to generate posters of warning to display in the town.

After a time, groups returned to our meeting place to share their information. When members of the committee to find the selkie skin discussed their plan and the map that they had drawn, the villagers began a concerned discussion about their ideas, demonstrating their problem-solving processes and higher-order thinking.

Villager: Shouldn't Robbie go? I mean, Robbie's the one who's the most concerned around here. And he's the one who's been up to the geo and you all haven't.

Tommy: If Robbie left the house, Finn Learson would spot him because Finn Learson is sleeping in the living room. We need Robbie to stay with Finn Learson to make sure he does not go near the geos. The reason why I think Finn Learson might go down there [is] because Finn Learson was about to check on his skin to make sure it was still down there when Robbie was down there.

Lastly, we shared tableaus from the book. The students' frozen pictures had to include every member of their group. Tableaus were a favorite of the stu-

dents. Many thought they were easy because "you just need to be good at freezing," and others enjoyed tableaux because they liked watching from the audience, trying to determine what part of the book their classmates were sharing. The attentiveness of the audience members as each group performed showed that they were involved watching the facial expressions, body movements, and subtle clues the performers gave them.

What the Students and I Learned

Reflecting upon the year, I saw a great deal of growth among my students as they participated in their extended drama events. Our first town meeting where students were problem-solving the fate of their gorilla teacher was very chaotic and disorganized. Yet, our last town meeting, regarding Finn Learson, ran smoothly. Students listened to others sharing their ideas; they knew what they wanted to find out, and they successfully organized themselves into their groups and took on the various tasks they had created.

Looking at the data I had collected during the year, I concluded that informal drama promoted many positive qualities within my classroom. The research process and findings are discussed in greater detail in a book describing teacher-researchers' individual studies (Kieffer, 1995).

Students learned about text through a connection of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and higher-order thinking

Students became more comfortable with public speaking. They appeared to organize their thoughts better as we continued with drama, because they needed to express their ideas and themselves clearly to their classmates.

Most made personal connections with their self-selected reading and classroom read-alouds. Denise expressed, "I love reading! Sometimes when I read, I pretend I'm the main character! Sometimes the main character has problems; I will stop reading and start solving the problems."

They made writing connections during town meeting committee work, with their map making, question writing, recording of responses, and warning posters. Two students even wrote creative stories during writing workshop time, expanding upon ideas they had developed in our drama activities with *Would You Rather*.

Higher-order thinking was developed as the students questioned each other about the books or their roles in drama. They asked tough questions and expected reasonable answers, which became apparent in the final town meeting. They expanded their understanding of the different literature selections as they embellished their responses and solved problems.

Confidence and Self-Esteem were Enhanced

Confidence and self-esteem for many students flourished during drama. Quadrika was quite competent as a leader during drama, and more often than not, she took on the leadership role when we were engaged in drama activities. I noticed that drama also increased Quadrika's confidence and creativity as a writer. She wrote a poem during writing workshop that was entered in a contest, and she won for the best overall piece for the fourth grade at our elementary school.

Drama really helped some of those students who were somewhat lower academically. It was a successful way for them to share their knowledge of the books without struggling with the difficulties of getting their ideas across with pencil and paper. Students who were in a pull-out resource program for extra help with language arts always actively participated in drama upon their return. If, however, we were engaged in other activities, I usually had to coax these returning students to be responsible for completing a similar task or to work quietly on an individual project and not disrupt other students working.

Students also became risk takers during our drama activities. While they were somewhat hesitant about our initial experiences with informal drama, being concerned about others' reactions and comments, they quickly and excitedly engaged themselves wholly in their drama as the year progressed.

Growing Cooperation and Respect for Others

Students grew in their ability to be attentive listeners; they were interested in what was happening, and they did not want to be left out. Erica mentioned to me one day that the students kept getting better and better at drama because they were doing what they needed to do. Arguing was always a concern with the students when they did group work. By the end of the year, many thought they had come a long way in cooperating and respecting others and their ideas. They learned that they could really work with others in the room and not argue. One student stated, "We did it together and had fun with it."

Drama Encouraged Creativity, Imagination, and the Enjoyment of Learning (Fun!)

Students became noticeably more creative and imaginative. I observed this in their writing, because some students began to show more creativity when they were developing their stories. One child spent a month on a piece about gnomes that was so well done and imaginative that it was the focus of one entire writing workshop sharing time. It gave other students the enthusiasm to attempt unique forms, including fantasy, with their writing.

Just being able to transform oneself into an inhabitant of the island of Black Ness required imagination. The pair of girls who felt the need to use a British accent and "take tea" as they gossiped gener-

ated those ideas on their own. Another student who was very serious and quiet was able to unleash himself and take on a whimsical quality within our drama experiences.

Finally, it was obvious that the children had fun and enjoyed learning. One student would always clap her hands and comment, "Yeah, drama!" whenever I said, "Let's pretend."

For all these reasons, I valued drama as a part of my curriculum. But I was even more convinced that drama was an important component of my language arts program when I heard comments from three students expressing what they saw as the value of drama. Quadrika stated that "being somebody else is the most valuable part." Tornmy shared that "a kid learns how to use his imagination." And Laurie said, "It helps you learn and it helps you, I mean when you read, it, it's helping you read."

Just like that imaginary blob of clay that each student molded into a unique use during that first week of school, drama experiences became something different for each child. After a year of shaping and reshaping their experiences, they had something important that they could take with them into the future.

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